The chief or an important village headman

[601] is usually addressed by a kinship term, either *baba* (father) or *ambuje* (master or grandparent). When he is referred to, his name is not used. Village headmen are owners or wardens of villages (*anyene misi*) but only those headmen of some standing are referred to as *mwenye*.

Important village headmen, like the chief, are in mystical danger from pollution by death. They cannot come to the hut in which a corpse is lying; and they cannot eat the chicken which has been brought to them by relatives of the deceased to announce the death. Like the chief too, an important headman may be buried in a tomb in his village and not in the graveyard.

But an important element in their relationship nowadays is that the Administration will support the chief against a village headman when it comes to a trial of strength, and that a headman these days is precluded by modern conditions from setting up chiefdoms as he did in the old days. Village headmen therefore must struggle for power against their fellows and the chief within the modern Administrative framework. Some attempts are made to resist the power of the chief but these are rarely successful. The dispute between Liwonde and Ndenda illustrates this.

Ndenda was an Nguru headman, who in 1947 had 284 tax-payers under him (Liwonde, the chief, had 186 in his village). Ndenda had come into Liwonde's area before the White invasion and had surrendered with his relative Mlelemba, to Liwonde. The second Liwonde had given him both initiation rights but, unlike his relative, he did not have the right to wear a scarlet headband.

In 1938 or thereabouts, Liwonde decided to move his village site from the Shire River to its present site about half-way up the Great Rift scarp. He sent two of his young men to look for a suitable site, and to plant some mango trees there when they had found one. Ndenda heard of this and sent one of his men to take Liwonde's men into custody. He took their hoes away and then told them to go back to tell the chief they were planting in his (Ndenda's) land. In due course Liwonde moved up to his new site, and asked Ndenda why he had taken the hoes away and whether he owned the country, i.e. was the chief. Ndenda now argued that Mlelemba's ancestors had been given the rights of chieftainship over this area and that the first Mlelemba in the area had given Liwonde some elephant tusks for these rights. Liwonde replied that the chief has a right to tusks and that many had given tusks to him but were not entitled for that reason to rights of chieftainship. Liwonde handled this situation by calling a meeting of the village headmen in the area. They assembled

3: Stanner D-5 (ca. 1912) 1922 FT7 Yao FT7

one of Malunga's sons died, after giving birth to quintuplets, some thirty years ago. Deformed children are buried alive. A large number of children is always hoped for and where polygamy is practised, some families are of considerable size, although the mortality among young children is very high. It is, of course, very difficult to state the child-bearing period among natives. It does not start so early as is commonly supposed, and I think the menopause is found within about the same limits as among Europeans.

Death. Natives of Nyasaland live to a good old age. That myth is not the case I have found to be one of the many fallacious beliefs concerning natives which should be relegated to the realm of exploded theories, as I have pointed out elsewhere.[1]

Death in old age is recognized as a natural event but apart from this, all sickness and death were formerly and are still to a large extent looked upon as the result of the machinations of some person, an idea which forms the outstanding feature in their belief in witchcraft, sorcery.[2]

Here I shall mention the ordinary customs in the case of death. During the last hours of a mortal illness, a man is tended by his wife or wives; the head wife sits constantly supporting his head on her lap or against her breast. A woman is similarly tended by her mother, sisters, and friends. As unconsciousness sets in and the extremities become cold, they say, "His spirit has gone and only the heart remains alive."

The native does not like the idea of lingering on and a man on his death-bed will say to his sons, "Now watch me that I die quickly." He may take medicine to help him over that time or he may give his sons instructions as to what to do. Should a man linger unconscious for a long time, friends will ask his sons, "Did he give you any instructions?" If he has done so, the sons will then carry them out. This perhaps consists of bathing themselves in medicines left by their father, while they stand on the roof of his house. Sometimes, the natives say of a lingering case, "Ah, perhaps he has eaten of a tortoise's heart!" knowing the phenomenon of the tortoise's heart and believing that by partaking of it, the same property can be conferred on the heart of a man.

When death is manifest, the body is covered with a cloth by a brother, a son, or some other person in attendance. The eyes are closed, the mouth shut, and at the present time, the body straightened out. This, however, is a recent practice copied from the Anyanja, Europeans, and Mohammedans.

News of the death must be sent to the chief, and a messenger goes to his village where the chief and his people sit in the village open space. He carries a fowl in his hand. The present of a single fowl always denotes bad tidings. One of the chief's men, seeing the stranger approach with the single fowl, will jump up and take the bird. He is joined by the others and they go away to the cross-roads where they kill the fowl, pluck it, cook it and eat it. In the meantime, the messenger delivers his news to the chief who will produce from his house about eight yards of white calico; if the deceased has been a much respected

[1] Hugh S. Stanner, "The life-span of negroes", (Lancet, April 11, 1914, p. 1002). [2] Vide infra, p. 266.

3:Stanner D-5 (ca. 1912) 1922 FT7 Yao FT7

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68. A child, whose one of its milk teeth drops out, stands some five yards away facing the door of the hut and throws the tooth over the roof of the hut, saying:

"Ali likungulo liwe lipwa-ako, mikoni lipwepe lipwakowe 'ipa"
"Oh! over tooth your there is, give me my of good one!"

Religion. The matter of the religious beliefs professed by natives of East Central Africa is one beset with many difficulties to the student of today. It has been the subject of many essays by workers in the missionary field, but the wide contact of the natives of Nyasaland with missionary effort during the past thirty years has done much to confuse the problem, and one finds that many missionaries in their writings rather color the picture with their own feelings. 771

I think probably the Yao with whom I am now concerned have a truer conception of their own beliefs than many of the subject tribes among whom mission teaching has more easily taken root. The religious beliefs of a people are to a large extent the reflection of the circumstances under which that people lives. The outstanding event to all natives is death. At death, something is lost to the body, without which life is impossible. This is the *mzimu* which may be translated "soul" or "spirit." The *mzimu* is said to leave the body of the dying man when he becomes moribund or unconscious. It appears that this same *mzimu* may leave the body during unconscious states unassociated with death, as when a man faints, in epilepsy, and during sleep. 771 761 774

Apart from this evidence of the dissociation of the *mzimu* from the living body, the Yao believe that a man's shadow is an objective manifestation of the soul and they will say "*the shadow is the mzimu.*" Fear is experienced if a man jumps on the shadow of his fellow. Light is also thrown on the constitution of the *mzimu* by the belief in a certain evil-spirit which dwells in deep pools. It is called *chimulo-mwi*, which means "one who may finish (drink up) all the water." The superstition regarding this evil spirit is that it can suck the blood from your shadow as you stand at the edge of the pool, till you become so weak that you fall in and are drowned. 774 774 776

After leaving the body at death, the *mzimu* goes to take up its place in the spirit-world, occupying a position corresponding to that held by the man during his life. With a truly materialistic conception, the soul is supposed to have all the attributes of the dead man, to be wealthy in proportion as the man was so on earth, and its relative position will be identical with that which he held among the living. The tribal chief becomes a paramount chief in the spirit world, the lesser chief holds sway in his lesser capacity, etc. We shall see that in intercession, when the tribe is threatened with calamities, it is the late paramount chief who is appealed to for help, and when one feudal chief is at war with another, the chief's dead predecessor will be called upon for aid. When a village is moved, it is from the spirit of the dead headman of the village that success in the enterprise is sought. Similarly, in family trouble, some dead ancestor is entreated to set things right, while a native 775

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be supposed to live in such trees. They are convenient natural objects for them to occupy, in fact practically the only ones to be found in villages. Trees may secondarily, therefore, be looked upon as in some degree sacred. About such trees strings or pieces of calico may be placed as an offering to the spirits of the departed. But the Yao do not erect little huts in their vicinity, hung about with strips of calico as is the custom among the Anyanja.

775 Macdonald[1] mentions the spirits in connection with Sochs and other hills round Blantyre and supposes them to be the spirits of the places themselves. This I think is unlikely; they would probably turn out to be spirits bearing the names of long departed Anyanja chiefs whom the immigrant Amangoche Yao venerated just "to be on the safe side," since they had come and taken the country which long ago belonged to the former tribe. When approaching or passing any spot held to be the dwelling place of spirits, salutation is made by clapping the hands.

Spirits of the departed may enter into animals or may take the form of animals, commonly lions and sometimes large snakes (python), but this belief is not so general among the Yao as among other tribes, in my opinion. An animal which is so possessed is called *liayuka*, from *ku-ayuka*, "to be transformed."

[825] [774] Apart from this habitation of inanimate objects above mentioned by *maiwu*, there is nothing that points to a belief in Animism among the Yao, so far as I know. Neither hills, rocks, streams, lakes, nor trees have their own spirits, nor are they endowed by the native mind with life.

Deceased persons appear to the living in dreams, the native apparently believing that the deceased appears in his material body.

775 787 791 They believe also in revelation of wishes of the deceased through the medium of the living. The spirit of the deceased is supposed to enter into the medium. The medium, I am informed, is always a woman, never a man. From the descriptions of some of these revelation séances, there can be no doubt that they are manifestations of *la grande hystérie*. The medium works herself up into a frenzy of excitement and in her delirium gives out the name of the deceased, the voice which speaks being that of the spirit within her. She rolls on the ground and foams at the mouth, uttering the word of revelation which is generally to the effect that some deceased chief's spirit is feeling aggrieved at the neglect of his tomb; the voice may go on to say that certain practices are forbidden, or demand that certain rites be observed by the people. The spirits which possess her are generally spoken of as *masoka*, a word which, though sometimes used as equivalent to *maiwu*, usually seems to have rather a sinister significance. Insane persons are called *masoka* and are thought to be possessed by a spirit, and vapor baths with exorcism may be practiced for their cure. In the case of the death of anyone who is possessed, in answer to my interrogation, I have been told that both the spirit which has entered into the man and his own *maiwu* leave his body.

[158] [761]

[1] Op. cit., vol. I, p. 70.

8:Mitchell E-4 (1946-1947) 1949
[P. 143B] FT7 Yao FT7

622 are composed of the descendants of slave-wives
of village headmen in days past. Like the village
643 headmen the chief was considered to be in danger
622 from contact with death. He could not attend
761 the funeral of commoners, he could not eat the
chicken which was brought to him at the announce-
ment of the death of a commoner (for a village
[753] headmen) or subject (of a chief). Should he do so
he would suffer from a disease called ndaka. Also
village headmen, like the chief were supposed to be
well versed in medicine and were regarded with
some awe on this account. The chief and the
village headmen were distinguished from the
commoners in these ways.

643 But, the chief himself was a village headman.
622 He had to administer the affairs of his family
692 group and slaves as had other village headmen.
He was involved in the struggle for power going
on around him because he was not lifted above
these secular struggles as was, for example,
the Zulu King.[1] Duff MacDonald records for
example: "In a dispute between the inhabitants
of different villages, the respective headmen
represent their own subjects, and the chief is
appealed to. All his decisions are final. Still
the chief may otherwise have less influence
than a powerful headman, and we have known
cases where he simply contented himself with
grumbling when his headman acted contrary
to his desire; and in many criminal trials he is
eclipsed by the sorcerers and pounders of poison."[2]
643 Again MacDonald records how the chief tried
622 to entice subjects away from a village headman
at a trial by pointing out that the village headman
had a poor character and was unsuitable to look
after people.[3] While there seems to have been
some evidence that a number of village headmen
under a chief acted jointly in the face of a common
danger, but apparently with no powerful mili-
tary organisation. Village headmen seem to have
been almost entirely autonomous in their actions,
slave-raiding on their own, even raiding villages
who paid tribute to the same chief as they did.